

Exploring School Conditions to Support Teacher Professional Learning

Introduction

Teacher learning is personal, unique to individuals, and context specific (Hargreaves, 2001; George et al., 2006; Collinson et al., 2009; Hargreaves & Fink, 2012; Hall et al., 2015; Fullan, 2016). To be effective, it can't be confined to what occurs in a workshop: we must also attend to what happens when a teacher returns to school to implement the new teaching practice.

To make teacher learning more sustainable, sufficient, and continuous, support from schools is critical for teachers to successfully incorporate professional learning into their teaching practice (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Fullan, 2016). School context is therefore a significant element of professional learning.

The Instructional Leadership Programme (ILP) is a two-year professional learning programme designed to extend and refine the instructional practices of post-primary teachers in Ireland. Teachers attend four sessions, each lasting two and a half days. It is facilitated by Professor Barrie Bennett through Education and Training Boards Ireland. This article outlines how the ILP was designed and implemented to support teachers in changing or refining their practice.

School conditions

The phrase 'school conditions' refers here to school factors that are critically important to support teachers to implement their learning after attending a professional learning programme or event. Unfortunately, we too often ignore the obvious and forget that school context differs from school to school. Specific sets of school conditions to support teacher professional learning in



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School context is important to support teacher professional learning. This article outlines the experiences of 15 teachers from five schools engaged in the Instructional Leadership Programme. It looks at the school conditions that supported the teachers in implementing new or refined strategies on their return to school. Two school conditions that support teacher professional learning are the engagement and support of school leadership, and supportive collaboration among teachers.

one school context can have different effects in another, even though the aim is to achieve a similar outcome (Opfer and Pedder, 2011).

This article reports two school conditions, highlighted by the teachers in this study, that supported them in implementing their new learning in their specific school contexts. The conditions are: the engagement and support of school leadership, and supportive collaboration among teachers.

Engagement and support of school leadership

School leaders have an important role in shaping teachers' learning and practice. They contribute to teachers' learning directly through actions they take to shape school conditions, and they influence learning indirectly by giving teachers access to learning opportunities, such as sending them to attend the ILP. Positive school conditions for professional learning are facilitated by principals who can plan and provide a wide range of opportunities and supports focused on teachers' improvement.

School leaders experience difficulty supporting instructional change if they do not understand the new innovation. They must therefore attend and complete the ILP with the teachers. This ensures they have the knowledge and understanding to support teachers with a change of teaching practice upon return to school.

A school leader selects and sends a team of three, including themselves, to the ILP. It is naïve for leaders to assume that a team of teachers will work successfully together and form supportive relationships to navigate change. They need to be aware of the individuals' personality and professional traits. The team need to be able to work together and form positive relationships to support each other with implementation upon return to school (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Gore & Rosser, 2020). Educational change is a complex process with little attention focused on the interpersonal relationships between teachers during educational change (Hall & Hord, 2015).

The school leaders in the schools that informed this article support teachers to establish collaborative mechanisms to support implementation of new practices. The collaborative structures give leaders the opportunity to plan, reflect on, and implement innovation from professional learning that will provide sustainable professional learning for teachers.

Supportive collaboration among teachers

Teachers learn in ways that are professional, personal, singular, and collaborative; they return to school to implement their learning both

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individually and collectively with colleagues. Providing teachers with a desire to sustain and share practice from professional learning through collaborative cultures can move them from the isolation that may make them resistant to change.

Three collaborative structures emerged from the schools in this study.

Teaching and Learning Club

Schools that established Teaching and Learning Clubs provided opportunities for the teachers to share their learning from the ILP. Teachers were motivated to present at the club through their willingness to engage with their professional learning and share their experiences. Presenting at the Teaching and Learning Club had a positive outcome for teachers. They had the opportunity to receive constructive feedback from colleagues, which supported them in developing their learning and practice.

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Peer observation

Teachers need support from colleagues to sustain their learning and practice. Some schools initiated peer observation so that teachers could view each other using ILP strategies. These schools developed open-door procedures among teachers to invite their colleagues in to share their practice, providing an opportunity for positive feedback. Positive relationships emerged as a key influence in teachers' developing support networks in this area.

Developing shared reflective practice

One school created Cosán workshops to encompass professional learning and reflection. Similarly to the Teaching and Learning Club, teachers shared their ILP learning with colleagues but with the added element of structured reflection on their learning and practice. This allowed them to assess the strengths and weaknesses of using the new ILP strategies.

Conclusion

Professional learning does not happen in isolation or just during a workshop. Positive school conditions are equally important for supporting teachers in developing their learning upon return to school. The insights generated from this study are important, because they highlight conditions at school level that support teacher learning. The engagement and support of school leaders, combined with supportive collaboration among teachers, provide positive school conditions to support teachers to implement their learning.

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